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Students to Retrace Roger Williams' Footsteps in England

First-year students will travel Williams' historic path, exploring the history and significance of Rhode Island's founder as part of the Roger Seminar



The statue of Roger Williams in Providence's Prospect Park memorializes the area Williams founded when he fled England for America.

March 7, 2017 | Edward Fitzpatrick

BRISTOL, R.I. – While many students will head to Florida to leave footprints in the sand this spring break, 15 Roger Williams University students will head to the United Kingdom to retrace the footsteps of their school's namesake, who founded Rhode Island after leaving England in the 17th century.

As part of a trip titled "Retracing Roger's Footsteps," students will travel to London, Cambridge and Essex from March 11-18. In London, they'll see Williams' childhood home, parish church and high school, and learn about his mentor, Sir Edward Coke. In Cambridge, they'll visit Pembroke College, where he studied. And in High Laver, Essex, they'll see where he held his first job as a private chaplain and got married.

"They are literally retracing **Roger Williams'** footsteps to learn his history and connect in a way that would be impossible otherwise," RWU President Donald J. Farish said. "I hope they come back with insight into the significance of using him for the name of our college. We talk about 'What would Roger do?' – because his voice, from some 400 years ago, can speak to us today."

RWU history Professor Charlotte Carrington-Farmer and National Park Service Ranger John McNiff, who works at the Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence, will serve as guides for the trip. The students will, for example, retrace the steps Williams took from his home in London's Smithfield section to his high school, passing through an area where people were once executed for their religious beliefs.

"Historians hypothesize that living in that area and seeing people being killed on the whim of the state contributed to his views on separation of church and state," Carrington-Farmer said.

The students are making the trip as part of the Roger Seminar, in which first-year students cultivate an investment in the university, the region and its history. The students read texts by and about Roger Williams, establishing a sense of place and identity for incoming students while focusing attention on crucial themes such as freedom of conscience, social justice and intellectual exchange.

"My hope is that the students will take what they've learned in the Roger Seminar into this new environment and think about how issues like freedom of conscience, critical thought and tolerance find their relevance over time," said Jason Jacobs, RWU's associate dean for general education, who is taking part in the trip. "The main objective of the trip is to 'retrace Roger,' meaning to learn more about where he came from and how it was possible historically for his point of view to take shape. But obviously, we want the students to think about the present and the future as well. And in the U.K., like in the U.S., a lot of these issues are up for debate all over again.

"The students will live their lives on a very interconnected, damaged planet and will need to contribute to debates about what it's possible to think and believe — debates about what people in communities owe each other or can demand of each other," Jacobs said. "Roger Williams' example teaches us that the work of thinking and debating is never finished. Idealism is a lifelong commitment."

The tour of England is just one of the spring break trips that RWU students are undertaking this year, said Robert A. Cole, vice provost and dean of arts and sciences. For example, other students will travel to France and Germany, visiting Mercedes Benz, Siemens and the European Parliament as part of an international business course focused on the European Union.

Follow along with their journey as students and faculty members explore history at #RetracingRoger.

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